The Last Word: Impressions of China

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Modern day China is marked with contrasts of the old and the new. In the cities standing among the high rises are the traditional single-story houses with tiled roofs and enclosed walls. In the rural areas, while most Chinese live in brick and mud houses, some peasants still live in barrel-vaulted caves carved into the loess. In our travels we had to compete on the roads with trucks, jeeps, buses, a few cars, and countless bicycles and animal-drawn carts. Though private ownership of automobiles is now possible (although the prices are exorbitant), bicycles are the primary means of personal transportation. The cyclists are very skilled in maneuvering in the rain, around the potholes and among the busy traffic. While most roads in the urban areas are paved and well maintained with dividing strips between bicycle lanes and motor lanes, in the countryside roads are mostly gravel or dirt.

Of special interest to me while in China was the strides made by Chinese women toward full equality with their male counterparts. In many respects Chinese women are liberated. They comprise half of the work force in the nation and are often employed in traditional male occupations; however, complete social and cultural equality is still to come. Perhaps the most impressive aspects of human relations in China are the respect for the aged and the love given to the children. We did not see any beggars or homeless wanderers in our travels. Crime and juvenile delinquency are rare. Posters urging vigilance against thieves, rapists and other criminals are visible everywhere.

Economically, the shift from ideologically oriented Marxism to pragmatic socialism in recent years is reflected in growing foreign trade and the use of material incentives. Farming is still the main occupation, however, communes and collective production have given way to individual autonomy in production choices and free farm markets. Being allowed to retain some of their profits, farmers are now wealthier than laborers. Small capitalist entrepreneurs have even sprung up in order to handle the tourist trade.

While in China we visited a university, a city-run middle school (equivalent to our secondary school) and a brigade-run primary and junior middle school. Universal primary schooling is practiced. The usual period of primary schooling is five years with the entrance age at seven. Recently, the move has been to lower the age to six and extend the period to six years. In some urban schools, foreign languages, chiefly English, are introduced as early as the second grade, but in most cases, languages are started at the junior middle school.

The middle school is divided into junior and senior levels, each with a three-year curriculum. Subjects include physics, chemistry and biology among others. The laboratories have relatively sophisticated equipment. At the end of each level, a qualifying examination determines the student's eligibility to the next level. Only five percent of the senior middle school graduates qualify for the university. Since 1977, with the end of the cultural revolution, academic achievement is once again used as the criteria for advancement. The curriculum at all levels is highly structured and intensive. The methodology promotes conformity.

Political party control is prominent at all strata of life. Currently the mandate from the Communist leadership is to achieve the four modernizations — agriculture, science and technology, defense and industry. Sending students overseas to learn science and technological skills and inviting foreign experts to the country are some of the prominent means of speeding the modernization process.

Although China has suffered from three centuries of deliberate stagnation under the Manchu dynasty (1644-1911), and was exploited by western powers in the nineteenth century and devastated by the civil war in the twentieth century, under Communist leadership the country has experienced definite improvement. Adult literacy programs and the relatively new education system has reversed the eighty percent illiteracy rate. The universal use of mandarin in schools throughout China makes communication among people of different regional origins easier. The government policy of moving people from one area to another has further broken down regionalism. The end of rationing of consumer goods such as grains, cooking oil, cotton cloth, in the 80s, has greatly enhanced the living conditions of the average Chinese citizen. During our stay we did not see lines for necessities. The free markets showed plenty of goods. The department stores were mobbed with buyers. New construction could be seen everywhere. People looked happy.

If the current policies of the government which embrace some elements of the private market economy are retained, China can be expected to modernize at a quicker pace than under the Maoist revolutionary system. Despite its enormous population and its underdeveloped state, China seems to be effectively forging a new society that still clings to the past.

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In September of 1984 Joyce Leung was part of a delegation from Bridgewater State College that traveled to China to negotiate a faculty-student exchange program with Shanxi Teachers' University. While in China she visited five cities in the northern part of the country including the capital of Beijing.